



Commentary:

## New Orleans: 6 months, little improvement

REBECCA CHISHOLM

APG News

I'd never been to New Orleans, so, when I went down to cover a follow-up story on a local muralist that was commissioned by the Louisiana Army National Guard (see article on page 2), I took my boyfriend with me, as someone who could help me see the differences and pain in the once proud city, since he attended law school in the area.

The first thing we noticed as we arrived at our hotel was the large number of teens roaming around. It wasn't completely unexpected, as I learned earlier in the week that the whole population of Dillard University is living and taking classes at the Hilton Riverside. It was obvious that the hotel made a large number of special preparations for the students. The lower levels had fresh wallboard and paint, and had been divided up into classrooms.

It was just the first striking example of the people of New Orleans working to help each other during such an intense time of need.

During the day the downtown area of the city was completely empty. No one walked around at nighttime, no groups of friends gathered for lunch. The Dillard students were the only people we saw for most of the weekend.

Saturday night we met some friends at the "best burger joint in town," according to everyone I asked. We waited three hours, outside in the mist, no chairs, to get in.

The restaurants that were open were more crowded than the APG Burger King at noon. We heard stories of waiting for over an hour at Rally's, the southern version of Checker's. Many of the bars and restaurants had waits of around two hours, just for lunch.

One of the biggest problems facing New Orleans businesses is a lack of employees. Thus, a lot of restaurants are still closed, waiting for the city's residents to return.

Signs were posted at all of the fast food restaurants, offering an hourly wage of more than \$8, with a bonus of around \$150 each week.

But, besides the food problems, New Orleans has the bigger, more obvious issues of rebuilding the tattered remains of the city.

Driving around town, the flooded areas are easy to see. It was in those areas that the rescuers hunted for people, marking the houses with an "X," the date and their initials. Flood lines are

on the buildings, at multiple levels. Everything is rusty and brown. Houses that burned during the hurricane's aftermath lay in ruin, with just chimneys and porches standing, waiting for demolition.

Words cannot describe well enough the destruction and pain in New Orleans. Blue tarps cover almost every roof in town and FEMA trailers are packed into lots and on front lawns as residents try to piece together their tattered homes and lives. Every window on some streets is boarded up. Houses have messages spray painted on them, searching for friends and pets.

New Orleans reads like the aftermath of a civil war—destruction all around, few survivors and the chance to rebuild, start over.

Those whose homes and businesses survived the wrath of Hurricane Katrina have returned to the city looking to resume the status quo as soon as possible. But, in their revelry and joy at the chance to regain their lives, it seems that those who fared more poorly are forgotten.

I guess I was surprised by the level of drunken revelry on Bourbon Street over the weekend. I thought that in such a horribly afflicted city, people would behave as though they were in mourning.

It has been nearly six months since Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, leaving 80 percent of the city under water. In that time, about 20 percent of the population has returned to the city, mostly to the almost inhabitable upper class areas.

Thus, those who returned have been around for a few months, getting used to an empty New Orleans and what it has to offer. They've been able to watch the city rebuild, oh so slowly, and see shops reopen, regions resettle. And, I guess that after all this time, they've become hardened to the city's tremendous short comings and lack of any real progress.

People everywhere seem to have forgotten about the tragedy of New Orleans. All that keeps the city in the news are the easily mocked words of Mayor Ray Nagin.

But, his words, though poorly stated, ring true.

If New Orleans wants to retain its cultural heritage and status as a city of diversity, they must work hard to rebuild all areas of the city.

Currently, the only work that is obvious to the passerby is that done in the wealthy side of

town. There can be many reasons for this, the first being that those are the folks with the money to pay the contractors, even without being paid insurance money.

But, perhaps it is just because re-roofing and siding a house is a much easier project to tackle than rebuilding entire neighborhoods.

I can imagine that the contractors in New Orleans are simply overwhelmed with the project at hand.

Everyone in New Orleans with a pickup truck seems to be a contractor these days. We found a sign on the street that read "Bob Jones, Contractor, Demolition, Tree Removal and Dance Instructor." I guess everyone needs a side job.

But, in all seriousness, it's hard to predict where New Orleans is headed. In six months, it still looks like I imagine it did after the flood waters receded. The city is a mess.

People have forgotten the problems there, and as time has passed, more drastic measures have been taken to keep New Orleans in the minds of those outside of it, including me. I just thought that over time, things would get better by themselves, that the state and federal governments would help people out.

It seems as though New Orleans has been abandoned. I'm not 100 percent sure where monies will come from to rebuild. Insurance companies are fighting over payments, the state government is tapped out and the federal budget is strapped fighting the war in Iraq. Who is going to take care of New Orleans?

My boyfriend was strangely quiet driving around the city during most of our trip. He told me that he just didn't know what to think.

"I didn't know what to expect. I just thought it'd be better than this by now," he said.

I came away from the experience with a feeling of sadness and a tinge of guilt. I hated taking pictures of the destruction, like I was taking advantage of people's loss. I could never imagine being the kind of reporter who made a career on someone else's devastation and sadness. It just seems inhuman.

And it took me a long time to put these words together. There is just so much to say and hardly the words to put it all together. And it needs to be done right.

## Louisiana Soldiers go from battle to battle

Story by

REBECCA CHISHOLM

APG News

It's very difficult for the normal civilian or even military person to picture what war is like in Iraq if one hasn't experienced it. And, it is equally as tough to imagine going through the devastating effects of hurricane Katrina's winds and flooding.

But, for the Soldiers of the Louisiana Army National Guard's Company C, 1088th Engineering Battalion, the reality was much worse, as they left Iraq in September to come home to an equally destroyed Louisiana.

The Soldiers in the National Guard have a special relationship, compared to those in the Army itself. Because they all come from the same geographic region, they have a tendency to go from boot camp to battle together, remaining a tight knit group throughout their tour.

Lt. Will Saint of Baton Rouge, spent two years on active duty before returning to Louisiana. He demobilized, took a few days leave to visit family, then immediately returned to active duty in New Orleans, helping keep the peace and maintain the city.

"It's dramatically different there now," he said. "Southern Louisiana is completely devastated, from the houses to the industry."

Explaining about industrial problems, Saint said that one of the hardest hit areas is the fishermen, who, if they can work, have nowhere to take their catch, as all of the processing plants are closed.

Businesses have no customers, he said, so people whose livelihood was not destroyed have nothing to do, as most of those who evacuated have no place to return to.

Staff Sgt. Christopher Ester of Donaldsonville, La., a small town an hour west of New Orleans, said his house had some damage.

"It's pretty frustrating... mind boggling," he said, at a loss for words. "When you leave disaster to go home to disaster, there's nothing good about it. Thankfully we have friends and family to support us. That support at home is the only reason that coming home to a disaster area isn't the worst thing that could happen. It's that silent support."

Spc. Joshua Pilant of Brusley Saint Vincent disagreed with calling post-Katrina Louisiana a war zone.

"It's not a war zone. Iraq is a war zone. This is home. It's a lot better here," he said.

But, Spc. Joseph Fourreaux of Marrero found home to be a lot worse than Pilant.

"It's a hell hole," Fourreaux said. His house's roof caved in, but it is already mended. His area is pretty well off, considering.

But how was New Orleans when he returned there?

"Looked like crap," he said.

Spc. Elizur Mitchell of Baton Rouge said his home and family were fine.

"But," he said, "Baton Rouge has taken on a lot of refugees and the city was ill prepared to handle the added population."

With that population exodus comes the decision to rebuild and how.

Saint, while working in the city, has spent time taking various politicians around town, showing the devastation and lack of progress.

Much of the basic infrastructure [utilities] needed to run the city are gone, he said.

"It's almost like they should implement a scorched earth policy, and raze everything and start anew. Rezone the city and decide how things should be built," Saint said.

The residents are suffering, he added.

"It's not much different here than Iraq. We just have an organized government to take care of it. We're getting there in Iraq."

Saint spoke of the difficulty in balancing life and tragedy, as guard members had duties to fulfill, even if they had no homes or families to support them. Other guard battalions have been on hand to help in Louisiana, a fact that Saint does not ignore, he explained.

"It's neighbors helping neighbors here," he said. "Guard members from 50 states and two territories are here to help. Soldiers from the Arkansas National Guard came home from Iraq when we went to relieve them, and when we came home, there were the same guys, helping us rebuild and take care of Louisiana."

"I've never been prouder to be in the National Guard. It is an unbelievable honor to serve in this very special unit," he added.

The guardsmen had varied responses to the disaster of Louisiana, but all agreed with a statement made by Ester, "Thank God I'm home."

"You leave Iraq thinking you'll have a welcome home, and there's just nothing left," Saint said. "But, God puts people together to accomplish extraordinary things in extraordinary circumstances. That's what we're doing."

(Author's note: The photos I took during my visit to New Orleans speak to the problems still present there. No description is necessary.)